

On Agamben on Debord--relate Mulvey

Perhaps one place to begin is Agamben's example of the cinematic practice of Guy Debord. Debord was not only the theorist and critic of the spectacle, he was also a filmmaker, directing six black-and-white sound films between 1952 and 1978. [7] Agamben attempts to explain Debord's cinematic strategy in relation to the image, and how this practice brings ethics and politics into play. Again, like Deleuze, Debord reveals that images are not static but images in movement, or gestural in the terms Agamben had previously used. How does he do this? Debord reveals the image in movement by revealing the conditions of cinematic montage. Again, this is a matter of exhibiting the medium as such, as pure means. In doing so Debord reveals that cinematic montage works through two conditions: repetition and stoppage. Once this is revealed cinema starts to work on itself, dissolving the boundary between genres and working on its own images.

The power of cinema, and the power of cinematic montage, is to free the image from its frozen state and transform it back into gesture. It can reveal the potential of the image, and release what has been frozen in the image. Montage is not simply a repetition of the identical, because in repetition this dynamic potential of the image is returned to us. On the other hand 'stoppage' in montage interrupts the stream of images. It brings the image to a stop and exhibits it as such, again as gesture. In this way these two opposing conditions, repetition and stoppage, both work to free the potential of the image and to return it to the movement of the gesture. This is what Debord does in his films, working on images he both repeats images to free the gestures fixed within them and stops images to allow us to think the image as such. As Rene Vinenet notes, the power of cinema for the Situationists was that it could lend itself 'to dismantling processes of reification'. [8] In Agamben's terms, Debord's cinematic practice dismantles the image to reveal the gesture. The task of cinema is to create but also to decreate, to decreate what exists to create something new.

What then happens to the image? The spontaneous ideology of communication is that the medium is secondary to expression. When something is 'properly' expressed we no longer notice the medium. The repetition and stoppage of montage reveal the medium, the 'pure means', and allow it to be shown as such. Not so much particular images but the image as medium: 'The image gives itself to be seen instead of disappearing into what makes it visible'. [9] Agamben gives two very different examples of this showing of the image as such, which reveal that the image is, in fact, imageless, because it is no longer an image of anything. One is pornography or advertising, in which the image is revealed as deficient, exposed as such, *but only to lead us on to more images*. There are always more images promised that will fulfill our desire but this image as such is not it. The other way, Debord's way, is to exhibit the image and so to allow the appearance of 'imagelessness'. In this case there is no longer some other image but the end of the image. It is in the difference between these two strategies that the ethics and politics of cinema exist.

Of course all this fits with an avant-garde and modernist cinema, with which I personally have a great deal of sympathy. However, many film theorists may well experience a sense of déjà vu, seeing in Agamben's theory a restatement of the kind of criticism and film practice associated with the

journal *Screen* in the 1970s. Certainly Agamben is hostile to narrative cinema and applauds an avant-garde cinema that can reveal the cinematic medium as such. Although, of course, he does not see this strategy of the image as confined to avant-garde cinema. In fact, his theory may help explain why advertising is attracted to avant-garde film and art, where advertising draws on this revelation of the image to lead us back into further images instead of decreating the image as such. Also, Agamben's theory might help us to think of a cinematic ethics and politics of the gesture, released from being frozen in the image.

One example of this could be the well-known scene from Krzysztof Kieslowski's *Three Colours: Blue* (1993) of the lump of sugar being dissolved in the coffee cup. In his 1994 master class on this scene Kieslowski states that the use of close-ups such as this one is to convey the mental state of the film's heroine. In her grief she can only focus on the small things, things close to her, such as the cube of sugar slowly being dissolved by the coffee. Her concentration on the sugar cube is what allows her to shut out everything else, other people, and, in particular, the man who has just expressed his love to her. Kieslowski explains the trouble he went to so that the cube would dissolve in precisely the right time for the shot. His assistant spent half a day soaking sugar cubes to find the right one so this 'detail' would last no longer, and no shorter, than four and a half seconds. Why all this trouble for a sugar cube? As Kieslowski explains: to convey the mental state of the heroine within the tolerances of the audience to watch a cube of sugar soaking up coffee.

However, could we not also see this scene, after Agamben, as the recovery of a gesture as simple as dropping a sugar cube into coffee. The cube touches the surface of the coffee and in four and a half seconds the coffee soaks into the cube which is then dropped into the coffee. In this 'stoppage' the dynamic potential of the image is freed as we are forced, if only for four and a half seconds, to watch the coffee slowly soaking into the cube. In this way, it may be, the image of dropping sugar into coffee is decreated and our attention drawn to the image and the gesture as such. Rather than only being an image of the heroine's alienation, her lack of connection to the world, this image of the lack of connection opens our connection to the gesture and to the image as the gesture of connection. No other image is promised, this is the ethics and politics of this scene. Instead the image becomes imageless and the gesture is freed as pure means. No longer simply a beautiful aesthetic image, but also the exhibiting of the gesture as our medium, the pure means of our being-in-the-world.

Ethics and politics in a sugar cube? No doubt we could be dubious, but I think Agamben's rather strange theory can help us to approach both film and philosophy differently. He draws attention to the silence of cinema and to the silence of philosophy as practices that suspend our relation to communication all the better to reveal communicability as such. Whether we have lost our gestures or not, Agamben redeems cinema as a site of the messianic promise contained in the image. Every image is, as he paraphrases Walter Benjamin, 'charged with history because it is the door through which the Messiah enters'. [9]

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Notes

1. Agamben, 'Notes on Gesture', p. 55.
2. For a bibliography of Agamben's writing, and further biographical information, see <<http://www.egs.edu/faculty/giorgioagamben.html>>.
3. Agamben, 'Notes on Gesture', p. 51.
4. Ibid., p. 52.
5. Ibid., p. 55.
6. Ibid., p. 60.
7. For a description of Debord's filmmaking practice, see Thomas Y. Levin's article 'Dismantling the Spectacle: The Cinema of Guy Debord' (1989).
8. Rene Vienet, quoted in Levin, 'Dismantling the Spectacle', p. 330.
9. Agamben, 'Difference and Repetition: On Guy Debord's Films', p. 315.

Bibliography

- Giorgio Agamben, 'Notes on Gesture' (1992), in *Means Without End*, trans. V. Binetti and C. Casarino (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).
- 'Difference and Repetition: On Guy Debord's Films' (1995), in T. McDonough, ed., *Guy Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Documents* (Cambridge, Mass. and London, England: The MIT Press, 2002).
- Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* (London: The Athlone Press, 1986).
- *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (London: The Athlone Press, 1989).
- Thomas Y. Levin, 'Dismantling the Spectacle: The Cinema of Guy Debord' (1989), in T. McDonough, ed., *Guy Debord and the Situationist International*.
- David Rodowick, *Gilles Deleuze's Time Machine* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997).

I have not read Agamben's work, but I am interested in this concept of gesture.

The power of cinema is that, in Agamben's words, it
> 'leads images back to the homeland of gestures'. [5] If cinema leads us
> back to gestures then it also leads us back to ethics and politics, but not

> to aesthetics. According to Agamben, the gesture is a particular type of=
> action -- it is neither about acting or making, producing or action, but=
> instead about enduring and supporting. It is neither a means in view of an=
> end, nor an end without a means, it is means as such.

Since Agamben has edited and translated Walter Benjamin, I wonder if by "gesture" he is referring to I'm more familiar with in Brecht's concept of "gestus." Brecht was very concerned with the stage actor finding the best expressive and performative form for political expression: one which could express contradiction and change.

Gesture, of course, is fundamental to stage acting, and was taken over, particularly in the melodramatic tradition, in narrative film acting: precisely why silent film acting (in D. W. Griffith, say) often seems so gestural to contemporary audiences.

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> dissolved in the coffee cup.

And how would this compare to the equally well known extreme close up of sugar cubes being dripped in a cup of coffee in Godard's Two Or Three Things I Know About Her, accompanied by Godard's whispered philosophical commentary?

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